This Labor Day Don't Forget Those Working Behind Bars
- The Dirty Underbelly of the U.S. Prison Labor Industrial Complex

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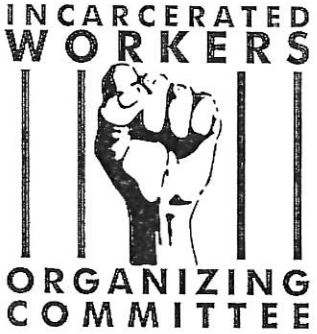
This summer tv screens have been dominated by heroic images of firefighters battling blazes in California and elsewhere. The mass media largely ignored that these wild fires are a deadly consequence of climate change. Unbeknownst to many, as well, is the fact that over 2000 inmates (including 50 youth offenders) are among the ranks of the firefighters on the frontline, risking life and limb to save others, even as they prepared to head back to their own cells. A CA state official was caught bragging that this move saved taxpayers $100 million per year since the inmates are only paid $1 per hour (plus $2 per day) with the possibility of mandatory 72 hour shifts.

On Aug. 23rd prisoners in 17 states across the U.S. launched a nation-wide strike demanding an end to prison slavery, poor living conditions, and death by incarceration. Organized by Jailhouse Lawyers Speak and the IWW's own Incarcerated Workers Organizing Committee (IWOC), among others, the strike began on the anniversary of the death of George Jackson and is expected to last until the anniversary of the Attica Prison Uprising. The strike was called in response to the death of seven inmates and a prison-wide lockdown resulting from inhumane conditions at Lee Correctional Institution in South Carolina in April. A similar nationwide prison strike in 2016 that began at Holman Prison in AL quickly spread to involve 24,000 inmates in 24 states.

The Food Chain Workers Alliance is among a growing group of allies in this most recent strike, in part because prisoners are exploited by agribusiness when other labor is not available. For example, when Colorado cracked down on undocumented migrant farmworkers, guess who was tapped to pick produce instead? Minimum-security female prisoners from the La Vista Correctional Facility in Pueblo, CO were outsourced to hoe and weed fields of cabbages, onions, and melons for $4 per hour (though the farmers paid the state $9.60 per hour for their labor). Over 30.000 inmates work in the nation's food service sector, which is already notorious for lousy wages and oppressive working conditions. Would you like some more abuse with your side of fries?

As Azurra Crispino, cofounder of the Prison Abolition Prisoner Support (PAPS), another supporter of the latest strike, noted, "The reason prisons exist is not to keep anyone safe — but because money gets made from prisons. So they're saying, look, if the reason you have us locked up is because we make you a ton of money, then if we strike and you give us minimum wage, we won't make you a ton of money anymore. And that will ultimately lead to reform for decarceration and prison abolition."

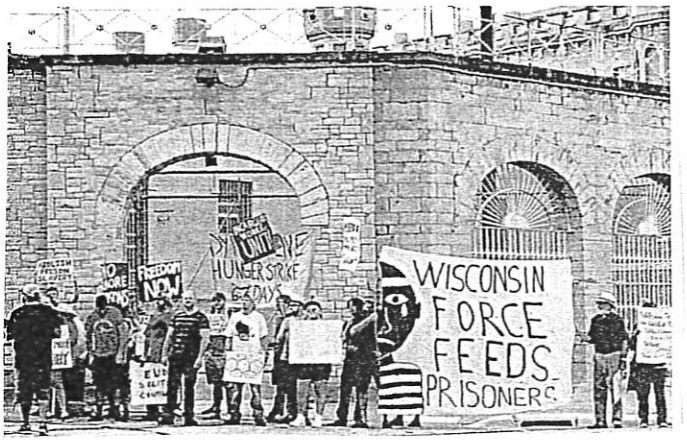


This reality is hardly lost on prisoners themselves. To quote one WI inmate's letter printed in IWOC's Sept. 2016 Voices from Behind Wisconsin Prison Gates newsletter: "The State of Wisconsin has capitalized off of incarcerating inmates—this includes the county jails, the courts and the prisons. It is no secret that D.O.C. is a billion dollar business—we are an assembly line to them… The prisons would cease to function without the collective effort of the inmates. If all the inmates refused to work statewide, the WI prison system would die."

One of the key demands of the current prison strike is that all those imprisoned in the US. be paid the prevailing wage in their current state or territory for their labor. Contrary to popular belief, prisoners are not paid minimum wage for their work while incarcerated, and this cheap docile labor force is conveniently exploited by corporations to undercut unions, labor rules, and other regulations to obtain an advantage in the "free market.". Ever wonder why Starbucks, or McDonalds, or Whole Foods or AT&T can be so profitable - perhaps it is because they exploit prisoners at less than $2 per hour to bag their coffee, make their uniforms, raise tilapia, or answer service calls… On average, prison wages have declined nationally over the last fifteen years – from an average daily wage of $4.73 in 2001 to $3.45 in 2017 - and in several states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, and Texas) inmates are often paid nothing for their work. Sounds a lot like modern day slavery...

After the horrific Deepwater Horizon oil spill in April 2010 in the Gulf of Mexico, BP naturally turned to prison labor as a cheap source of clean-up help. Known as "the inmate state," Louisiana has the highest rate of incarceration in the U.S. with 70% of its inmates being African-American men. Since the state only has beds for half of its inmates, it makes sense to outsource them to private companies like BP which pay them at most forty cents an hour. Under the federal Work Opportunity Tax Credit, private-sector employers get $2,400 for every work release inmate they hire. On top of that, they can earn back up to 40 percent of the wages they pay annually to "target group workers."

Here in Wisconsin we have over 20,000 inmates (twice as many at MN which has a comparable overall population and crime rate) in nearly 40 facilities that cost taxpayers $1 billion+ year to operate, more than the entire state budget devoted to the UW college system. When Waupun was established in the 1850s, the state's oldest prison, it was constructed with prison labor by legislative decree. Legend has it that the first WI inmates literally built their own cells and then walked inside and shut the doors. Today, inmates at Waupun milk cows for the state, earning from 50 cents to $1.50 per hour. Last year, Wisconsin's three prison dairies alone earned taxpayers more than $5 million – you can savor their hard work next time you enjoy a Babcock Hall ice cream cone at UW-Madison. Over 1600 WI inmates actually pay the state $740 per month for the privilege of being in work release programs.



Badger State industries was established in 1913 as a means to outsource WI prison labor to the private sector. There are now 11 operations in 10 state prisons using inmate labor to do everything from printing and making furniture to recycling and license plates. Many local governments are following the DOC example. For instance, Racine County intends to outsource all of its landscaping, painting, and snow shoveling jobs that used to be done by unionized workers to its prisoners.

Some have argued that employing prison labor provides valuable vocational skills that will be useful once inmates re-enter society. This ignores the fact that many of them face such long sentences they will never enjoy the freedom to utilize the supposed job skills they gained. Others, because of their criminal record, have few good options once they get out – many of the prisoners fighting fires in CA can't even be hired to do the same job as civilians.

For those involved in the contemporary prison abolition movement, the struggle that began over 150 years ago to end slavery is still ongoing. Genocidal conquest and violent industrialization – the bloody hallmarks of the U.S. "success story" - could not have occurred without the capitalist exploitation of forced labor – both slaves and prisoners. My own ancestors who came to the U.S. as undocumented immigrants fleeing a neocolonial 19th century "famine" in Ireland were unwitting victims of this imperial project. If they had not come as indentured servants, they could just as easily have come as convict chattel. Over 50,000 prisoners were used to originally colonize Virginia and Maryland alone.

Today the US imprisons five times as many people per capita as any other industrialized country – well over 2.3 million are now trapped as human cogs running the machine of our prison labor industrial complex. Those who have seen the movie 13th will know quite well that slavery has persisted in the U.S. long after the Emancipation Declaration issued by Pres. Lincoln during the Civil War. Forced labor is still allowed under the 13th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." As we celebrate Labor Day amidst a nationwide prison strike, let us not forget all those behind bars who have little or no choice about whether or not they will ever get to enjoy the fruits of their own labor.

For more info, visit: https://incarceratedworkers.org/